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ABSTRACT

A total of 85 first grade students and 12 classroom teachers participated in a study to determine the predictive efficiency of a number of variables for early identification of reading problems. The variables included teacher judgment and the auditory sequential memory and visual sequential memory subtests of the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA). In addition, interviews were conducted to determine the strengths and weaknesses of potentially poor readers as perceived by classroom teachers. Finally, teachers were asked to indicate what persons, other than classroom teachers, provided instructional intervention for good and poor readers. The findings indicated that the correlations between teacher judgment and the auditory sequential memory subtests of the ITPA were significant for both good and poor readers. In addition, the interview data revealed that poor readers were generally better in comprehension than in word attack skills. The interview data also revealed that parents provided reading help for a large percentage (62%) of good readers, but only for a small percentage (20%) of poor readers. (Author/FL)

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Early Intervention in Reading:
A Look at Good and Poor Readers¹

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Educators are acutely aware of the need for early instructional intervention to prevent reading failure, and there is no doubt that many children who are candidates for such intervention ought to be identified in kindergarten and beginning first grade. Among the problems faced by a typical first grade teacher are first to determine what ways are most useful to identify potentially poor readers; once potentially poor readers are identified, the problem often becomes who, aside from the classroom teacher, can provide the instruction?

Identification of potential reading problems has been of primary concern to educators for at least the past half century. The readiness movement and reading readiness tests were an attempt to prevent and predict potential reading problems (5). Dissatisfaction with traditional readiness tests has caused researchers to look elsewhere for potential screening devices (4). An informal survey of almost any school system reveals that teacher judgment and/or some type of standardized assessment are the most commonly used methods of identifying potential reading problems.

A standardized instrument which has been used recently for identification of potential reading problems is the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA). However, the administration of the entire test is cumbersome, and the predictive value for a number of the subtests is questionable (7). A reexamination of the ITPA by researchers has indicated the efficacy of using certain ITPA subtests rather than the entire instrument. Prominent among the subtests used in reading research are the auditory sequential memory and visual sequential memory (2,3,5) subtests. Bateman(1) indicates a possible course of actions both for the initial identification of students with potential reading problems and for

future instructional procedures. However, because of the atypical population used by Bateman, a study was needed that would reexamine the predictive efficiency of the auditory sequential memory and the visual sequential memory subtests with good and poor readers who were representative of the average first grade population.

In addition to looking at formal and informal means of assessing beginning readers, a problem naturally arises once identification has been made of potentially poor readers. What people are available both in and out of school who might work effectively with such readers?

The present study addressed itself to some of the issues cited above by posing the following questions;

- 1) What is the predictive efficiency for teacher judgment of potentially good and potentially poor first grade readers?
- 2) What is the predictive efficiency of the visual sequential memory and auditory sequential memory subtests of the ITPA in identifying potentially good and poor readers?
- 3) Can the predictive efficiency for the identification of potentially good and poor readers be increased by using the variables of #1 and #2 in combination?
- 4) What strengths and weaknesses of potentially good and poor readers are perceived by the classroom teacher?
- 5) What persons other than the classroom teacher, provide instructional intervention in reading for potentially good and potentially poor readers?

Population

In October, twelve classroom teachers in Maryland and Pennsylvania were asked to use their professional judgment and select two potentially good and five potentially poor readers from their first grade classrooms. A sample of 85 students was thus identified by the twelve teachers. The group of potentially good readers consisted of 12 girls and 12 boys with an average of six years six months; the group of potentially poor readers had 27 girls and 34 boys with an average age of six years four months. This difference in age was not statistically significant.

Procedures

In October first grade teachers from the twelve classrooms were asked to identify two potentially good readers and five potentially poor readers from their first grade classroom. Members of the research team administered the visual sequential memory and auditory sequential memory subtests of the ITPA to each of the students so identified. Additional descriptive information was obtained by the researchers from an open-ended interview form which consisted of two questions: (1) What are the strengths and/or weaknesses of this child in your classroom? (2) From whom other than the classroom teacher, does this child receive help in reading?

In May the same group of researchers administered the Botel Word Recognition Test as a measure of reading achievement. Teachers were again interviewed. This time they were asked three questions: 1) On a 5-point Likert scale, how would you rate this child's performance in phonics? 2) On a 5-point Likert scale, how would you rate this person in sight vocabulary? 3) From whom, other than the classroom teacher, does this child receive reading help?

The predictor variables of teacher judgment in identifying potentially good and potentially poor readers and the two subtests of the ITPA were correlated with reading achievement as measured by the Botel Word Recognition Test. In addition, multiple correlations were computed using the predictor variables of teacher judgment, auditory sequential memory, and visual sequential memory and the outcome variable of reading achievement as measured by the Botel Word Recognition Test.

From the interview data, simple and multiple correlations were computed using the October predictor variables and the teacher assessment of phonics and sight vocabulary achievement from the May interview. Descriptive data were tabulated comparing good and poor readers on strengths and weaknesses noted in October. Comparative data for good and poor readers about what persons other than the classroom teacher provide instructional intervention were tabulated from both October and May interviews.

Results

Table 1 shows the correlations of the October predictor variables with reading achievement in May as measured by the Botel Word Recognition Test. All variables showed a significant relationship to reading achievement.

Table 1. Correlations Between Predictor Variables and Reading Achievement

Insert Table 1

Multiple correlations computed by combining all three variables yielded a coefficient of .87. Clearly, this is not much different from the predictive efficiency of teacher judgement alone.

Interview Data

Interesting trends emerged from the interviews during the October and May data collection sessions. In October teachers responded to an open-ended question asking for the strengths and weaknesses of readers whom they identified as potentially good or potentially poor. Not surprisingly, teachers mentioned more weaknesses than strengths for the poor readers and more strengths than weaknesses for the good readers. In fact, in only 3 cases were good students listed as having any weaknesses. All three of those students were said by teachers to have short attention spans; one of the three was said to be a behavior problem. Both strengths and weaknesses were listed for the poor readers, and the results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Strengths and Weaknesses of Poor Readers in October

Insert Table 2

Because of the high percentage of poor readers with weaknesses in sight vocabulary and phonics listed during the October interview, teachers

were asked to rate students on these two skills on a 5-point Likert scale during the May interview. The correlations of these teacher ratings of achievement with the three predictor variables are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlations of Teacher Ratings of May Reading Achievement

Insert Table 3

Multiple correlations were computed for the combination of the two ITPA subtests with sight vocabulary and word attack. The multiple correlation of the subtests with sight vocabulary was .75; with word attack, the multiple correlation was .77. Clearly, using the two subtests together improves their predictive efficiency in this instance. However, it is obvious that the predictive value of those subtests is not far superior to teacher judgement.

During both the October and May interviews, teachers were asked to indicate persons other than classroom teachers from whom students received help in reading. Comparisons of the May and October responses are tabulated in Table 4.

Table 4. Reading Help Given to Good and Poor Readers in October and May

Insert Table 4

In all categories from the May data, except "reading teacher" and "parental help", the persons giving help to good and poor readers were essentially the same.

Discussion

Results from this study provide partial answers to the questions posed at the outset. Importantly, the value of teacher judgement early in the school year to identify possible reading problems was convincingly confirmed. Likewise, the use of the visual sequential memory and auditory sequential memory subtests of the ITPA showed considerable usefulness as predictors of reading success at the end of first grade. The auditory sequential memory subtest proved to be the stronger of the two. Because of the relative ease of administration of this subtest, it ought to be considered in other experimental settings.

Much information of interest was gained from the interview data. When potentially good readers are compared with potentially poor readers in the beginning of the year, the overwhelming number of teacher comments focused on the good readers' strengths and the poor readers' weaknesses. Moreover, the most frequently cited problems for poor readers were sight vocabulary (for 62% of poor readers) and phonics (for 72% of the poor readers). Since comprehension was listed as a problem for only 22% of the poor readers, this may indicate an over-reliance on decoding skills to assess reading achievement. It may also indicate that a more fruitful way of approaching reading instruction for potentially poor readers might be to focus on the meaningful aspects of reading as well as sight vocabulary and phonics drill.

Interesting differences emerged from examining the people from whom good and poor readers received help in reading. Although reading teachers provided help for many more poor readers than good (41% versus 4%, respectively), it may be somewhat disturbing to note that they still worked with fewer than half of the poor readers. The reasons for this lack of intervention by reading teachers are not present in the interview data, leaving one to speculate on the possible explanations. This finding remains one which warrants further study.

For both groups of students paraprofessionals provided much instructional intervention. Because of the extensive involvement of paraprofessionals in reading instruction, constant pre-service and in-service training must be provided. Also, the training and use of these paraprofessionals to provide specific types of instructional interventions in reading ought to be considered.

Finally, the role of parental help should be explored further, for this marked the clearest difference between the types of help given to good versus poor readers. One cannot be certain if the increase in parental help for good readers from 16% in October to 62% in May is a real increase; perhaps teachers know parents better in May than in October and can make better estimates. What is clear is that by the end of the year according to teachers' estimates 62% of the good readers were getting parental help compared with 20% of poor readers. It is interesting to speculate on the possible cause/effect relationship of parent involvement. Because correlational studies do not indicate cause/effect relationships, a logical extension of the present study might involve training parents of potentially poor readers to provide specific instructional intervention in reading.

Pressing questions remain related to early intervention for children

with potential reading problems. One of the obvious questions centers on determining which types of instructional interventions work best with potentially poor readers. Another question which needs to be considered in light of current staff freezes for many school systems is who should provide the instructional interventions. Results of this study indicate that para-professionals including trained parents seem to be a promising place to begin.

Note

1. Research team members included: Joan Coley, Western Maryland College; Linda B. Gambrell, University of Maryland; James Geyer, Shippensburg State College; Jane Matanzo, Hood College; Gerald Stafford, Shippensburg State College; and Robert M. Wilson, University of Maryland.

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Table 1. Correlations Between Predictor Variables and Reading Achievement

Predictor Variables	Reading Achievement
Teacher judgement	*.85
ITPA- auditory	*.64
ITPA- visual	** .31

*p. <.01

**p. <.05

Table 2. Strengths and Weaknesses of Poor Readers
in October

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Oral Language	*2 (3%)	10 (15%)
Alphabet Knowledge	2 (2%)	12 (20%)
Attention Span	7 (11%)	34 (56%)
Sight Vocabulary	9 (15%)	38 (62%)
Phonics	7 (11%)	44 (72%)
Comprehension	8 (13%)	14 (22%)
Behavior	0	1 (2%)

Note: *Numbers indicate number of poor readers mentioned with this characteristic. Percentages indicate percentage of total poor readers with this characteristic. Total number of poor readers was 61.

Table 3. Correlations of Teacher Ratings of May
Reading Achievement With October Predictor
Variables

	Sight Vocabulary	Work Attack
Teacher judgement	.74*	.74*
ITPA- auditory	.53*	.58*
ITPA- visual	.26	.20

*p < .05

Table 4. Reading Help Given to Good and Poor Readers
in October and May

	October		May	
	Good Readers	Poor Readers	Good Readers	Poor Readers
Teacher Aide	*13 (54%)	39 (64%)	19 (79%)	43 (70%)
Reading Teacher	2 (8%)	22 (36%)	1 (4%)	25 (41%)
SLD Teacher	0	6 (10%)	0	0
Speech Teacher	0	8 (13%)	0	0
Volunteer	3 (12%)	15 (25%)	11 (45%)	30 (49%)
Special Resource Teacher	0	4 (7%)	0	4 (7%)
Parents	4 (16%)	2 (3%)	15 (62%)	12 (20%)

Note: *Numbers indicate number of children out of the total sample for the group listed for this type of help. good readers-n=24; poor readers-n=61.